

Sons or Slaves?

Galatians 4:1-20

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Let's imagine that I am a multimillionaire and I don't have any children—I don't have any heirs. So, for whatever reason, I go to the state penitentiary and find a young man there whom I decide to adopt as my son. I adopt him not only as my son, but as the heir to my fortune.

Now, as long as he is there in prison, it is hard to tell the difference between my son and the other inmates. But there is a dramatic difference: he is now a multimillionaire. It's not until he gets out of prison that the difference becomes obvious. I pour out my inheritance on him; he buys a house and gets a vehicle and starts a business. But more than all those material things, I bring him into the life of my family and treat him like my son. He really experiences a life he has never known before, and everything seems to be great—except he just can't take it. He doesn't know what to do with this new life. So he goes out and commits a crime; he turns himself in; and he intentionally goes back to prison. I'm then left with the question: why would he do that?

That *is* the question: why do we do that? That is what Paul talks about in Galatians 4. In chapter 3, Paul has been telling us that we are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26). Then verse 29: "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

Now Paul picks up that train of thought in Galatians 4:1: "Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father."

Paul is using a picture to talk about life under the Law. He is saying that in their culture it was hard to tell the difference between the son of the master and a young slave, because they were both under guardians. They were both under managers; so, in a sense, they were under bondage (the word he will use later).

But there is a dramatic difference. One is heir of the family fortune and one is a slave, but in those early days it was hard to tell the difference between the two. The word for "child" is a Greek word that means a young child; literally it means "not speaking." Paul says it was hard to tell the difference... until a date set by the father.

In the ancient cultures, they were much more dramatic about the passing from childhood to adulthood. It was a very defined passing. For example, in the Hebrew culture it was the bar mitzvah at age 12, which literally means "sons of the Law." At that point the child was no longer a child, but was now responsible for his own behavior under the Law. He was a man. For the Greeks it was age 18. It was a very definite passing to show that one was no longer a child, but was considered an adult with all of the privileges and responsibilities of that. That's what he means by "until the time set by the father."

Verse 3: "So also we [*he's saying that's an analogy*], while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world." When Paul says "when we were children," he is not talking literally. He's talking about the nation of Israel, the Hebrew people. When they were under the Law, in a sense that was their childhood. "They were

under a guardian, a tutor, as he says in chapter 3. They were bound under the elemental things—the ABCs, the basics.

Now, a child needs the basics. A child needs supervision and a guardian. That's not a bad thing; it's a necessary thing. But when the Hebrew people were in their childhood, when they were under the Law, it was hard to tell those who were heirs according to the promise and those who were slaves under the Law. In other words, it was hard to tell those who believed the promise by faith and lived in obedience under the Law as an outflow of their belief in that promise, versus those who were trying to merit righteousness by obeying the Law. It was hard to tell, but Paul says there was a big difference: one was a slave, and one was an heir to the inheritance to come.

Verse 4: “But when the fullness of time came [*that corresponds with the date set by the Father*], God sent forth His Son [*a statement of the deity of Christ, that He is God*].” This is a fulfillment of the promise that God made to Abraham when God told him, “If you fail to keep this covenant, then I will shed my blood to make it right.” Therefore, Jesus was God in the flesh in fulfillment of that promise. He was also born of a woman, which is a statement of humanity. That, again, is a completion of the promise made to Abraham that “He would be your seed”—it shows His humanity. So He was both fully God and fully man.

We have the same language in Isaiah 9:6, a verse commonly read at Christmas time, “For unto us a Son is given (deity), unto us a child is born (humanity), and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor...”

But Paul also makes an interesting statement at the end of verse 4: “born under the Law.” Sometimes we forget that Jesus was born under the Old Covenant—that Jesus was under the Law. Jesus fulfilled the Law perfectly. Jesus was the one man throughout all of history who obeyed the Law perfectly. He had to be without sin in order to pay for someone else's sin on the cross.

It is interesting when you think about it, how we often look to Jesus as the model of grace living and forget that Jesus modeled grace under the Law. The Law didn't make Jesus holy; the Law merely revealed that He was holy.

I know one of the great fears that the legalist has is that grace produces lawlessness. We fear that grace produces this license, and that's why we have this need to try to go back to our rules and our lists that control people's behavior. But that doesn't make any sense when you understand that the life that we now have is the very life of Jesus, and Jesus lived perfectly under the Law. It is not license; it's the ability to live out the very character of God in a way we never could have imagined before. Jesus models that.

Why did He come? Verse 5: “in order that He might redeem [*that He might purchase us out of slavery*] those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” We are born into the family of God.

Adoption makes a reference to the fact that we have been made legal heirs of the inheritance, and that's why it is always in reference to “sons.” We've talked about this before. It isn't a reference to your gender or mine; it's a reference to the fact that sons were the legal heirs to the family fortune. Because we are in the Son of God, we are all sons in that sense.

Verse 6: “And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ ” Because we are sons, God has sent forth his Spirit—the very Spirit of God Himself. The very Spirit of Jesus now dwells in our hearts because of salvation by grace through faith. It is the very person of God (Galatians 2:20): the “old me” has died; the “new me” is the very life of Jesus flowing out of me. That is the very foundation that we must believe to be people of grace.

We often struggle with, and wonder what it is that causes us to go back to the Law—back to slavery. And all I can conclude is that either we don’t understand this or we don’t believe that it is the very life of Christ in us which now flows out and defines who we are as Christians.

It has been interesting that over the last number of years there has been a lot of discussion about the exact language to use when describing what it means to trust Christ as Savior. I find that interesting, because the New Testament uses all kinds of different language to describe that event. It’s a way of seeing it from different angles and emphasizing different things. One of the things I’ve often heard is, “Don’t ever say ‘Invite Jesus into your heart’ ”—but that’s exactly what Paul says here. Salvation is the very Spirit of God now dwelling in my heart in the very core of my being. It defines my very essence, my very nature; it’s who I am. So much so, he says, that we come before God and we cry out “Abba! Father!” That’s an Aramaic term which means “Papa,” or we would say in our culture, “Daddy.”

Now realize, this was absolutely radical. In the Hebrew culture they never would have imagined being that familiar with God. As a matter of fact, the presence of God was in the Holy of Holies, which was a place that was separated by a great veil. The Hebrew people could not just walk into the presence of God; they would be struck dead. Only the high priest could enter into that Holy of Holies, and only on certain occasions. That was their understanding of the presence of God.

But when Jesus died on the cross, at that very moment in the temple, the veil was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing that now people had access into the very presence of God because we have become sons. We have become God’s children. We can access God and we stand before Him and call Him our heavenly daddy.

When Jesus prayed, “Our Father which art in heaven,” the Pharisees became very upset. They felt that was way too familiar. Now to move from that, to this very intimate term, is just a reminder of how radical and how intimate this change is, that is now the basis of our Christian walk.

When I hear that term “daddy” everything about that is good for me. I grew up in a home where my dad modeled for me many of the attributes of God. It was a home based on grace and acceptance and love. I didn’t have to perform; I didn’t have to measure up; I didn’t have to do anything to be loved and accepted. It gave me what I needed to go out and risk failure and to have the courage to try; because when I came home, the environment was grace. So when I understand that God is my heavenly daddy, everything about that is good.

But some of you didn’t grow up in an environment like that, and the picture that is created by the word “daddy” isn’t necessarily a positive one for you. Some of you grew up in environments where you never measured up, where nothing ever seemed to be good enough. It was a performance-based relationship, and that was really what defined life with Dad at home. Or maybe your dad was an alcoholic or something similar, and things were just never

predictable. Things may have always been unsettled, and it created this environment that was anything but grace-filled.

When that happens, then your concept of your heavenly daddy becomes warped because of your experience with your earthly daddy. Those of you who had that experience have to go to work and begin to separate out the difference between an earthly father and a heavenly Father, and what it really means to experience God as a grace-filled heavenly daddy. For some of you, you have to believe by faith that you will experience something with God that you've never experienced before. That's great faith, but you have to believe that what has changed is absolutely radical.

Verses 7-8: "Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. However at that time [*meaning before faith*], when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods." Before we knew God, we lived under the Law; we lived by the gods of this world. We sought meaning and fulfillment and pleasure in the things of this world, even in religious systems.

Verse 9: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?"

Why do we do that? Once we know God, once we've been adopted, once we've experienced the very presence of the Spirit of God in our lives, once we have been set free—why do we drift back into slavery? Why do we go back to the Law? Why do we go back to a performance-based system of religion before God?

"Not only to know God, but to be known by God." That's an amazing thing—that God knows you in an intimate way. He loves you. You have this daddy relationship with Him. Paul says, "Why do we turn back to the weak (meaning those things that are powerless to change us), to the worthless—those things that really have nothing to offer us, that have no value compared to this magnificent inheritance that we have in Christ?"

Oftentimes legalism is presented as a system to measure maturity. But Paul says legalism isn't mature at all; it's very childlike. We move into adulthood in this life of Christ, but for some reason we just either don't understand it or we don't believe it. So we go back to living like a child under the guardian, having to be told what to do.

He defines it in verse 10, "You observe days and months and seasons and years." He is talking about the Jewish Law, the Old Testament Law. They had the keeping of the Sabbath, and they had certain holidays and celebrations that they kept as part of their yearly calendar. But all of those things were meant to create a picture of the coming of the Messiah. So when the Messiah came, there was no longer a need for these pictures, because He now dwelled within their hearts. But the Judaizers, the legalists, were saying, "No, you need to still keep doing these things in order to be right before God, in order to have God's favor."

We think about what these Galatians experienced in terms of this radical new birth, and the very presence of the life of Christ within them, and we wonder, *How could they be so foolish as to go back to slavery under the Law? What's wrong with these people? Why don't they get it?* And that is the question: what is wrong with *us*? Why do we do that?

The fact is, every single one of us struggles with legalism. We all do—we might as well just admit that. There is something within us that wants to revert back, in a sense, to our childhood. We want to go back where we have this guardian that protects us, rather than celebrating and living this new life in Christ. We do that because it takes faith to believe that the radical change has really taken place.

If you were to go back and look at the constitution of the Berean Churches (our whole fellowship of churches has one constitution) over 20 years ago, you would have found a list of things that really defined you if you were going to be a member of the church. I went back into the old constitution and found the list. It said that in order to be a member, you had to avoid the theater, the card table, the dance, intoxicating beverages, tobacco, drugs, and membership in secret societies.

Our movement comes out of the fundamentalist movement that was known for its lists. It is not that those things are good or bad; because everybody needs to have their own convictions on those things. That's not the issue. The issue is holding those up as a checklist—that if you do or don't do them, then it makes you spiritual. You can avoid all those things and still be as pagan as a rock. But the moment I hold that up as a checklist to determine if one is spiritual or not, I have become a legalist. That doesn't define spirituality. It doesn't work; and that's why it was taken out of the constitution 20-some years ago. It just doesn't work; it has never worked. We do not define spirituality based on a checklist of rules and regulations. It is based on the very life of Christ flowing in and through us.

We do have to admit that we have our days and weeks and seasons and years (just like the Hebrew people). We have those things that make it on our list that we use to evaluate if someone is spiritual or not. Years ago, it was attending Sunday night church or Wednesday night prayer meeting; or maybe now it's Sunday school, or being in a certain prayer group. Or maybe it is if we worship a certain way—you know, if you stand or you sit or you raise your hand or you don't raise your hand. A lot of it has to do with how we dress and how we look and how many earrings we have on. All of these things we tend to have in our mind as a checklist as to whether or not somebody is spiritual. But those things don't tell us what's really in the heart; they really don't define spirituality at all.

I think it was this past summer (I'm not exactly sure on the date), but we had a worship team leading on stage. Carey was the leader, and the one who was really leading that morning was a college student by the name of Ben. Ben's got a great heart for God. But on that Sunday morning he was wearing shorts. He did a great job of leading us in worship. As a matter of fact, when he prayed he blew me away with the depth of his intimacy with God. I told him that. I was very excited about Ben that day.

But some people felt the need to send in letters to me and to Carey and to Ben because he was wearing shorts. What disappointed me about that is, rather than walking away being excited about this young man who is so passionate about God, they couldn't get past his shorts. Now, we address those things and we try to remove distractions. We would have taken care of it; it's certainly not a big deal. The problem is, we get into those types of things as if somewhere in the New Testament God defined whether or not you could wear shorts when you worship. Whether he had pants on or shorts that day wouldn't have changed his heart. And I love Ben's heart. I'll take him on my team anytime, because he has a great heart for God.

We have our days and our weeks and our seasons and our years. We do—we all have our checklists. I have mine and you have yours, and we battle this all the time. I don't like that in me, but it's there. There is something about us that tends to revert to that, and that's what Paul is talking about.

Verses 11 and 12: "I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. I beg of you brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong."

In verse 12 it is really hard to understand what is being said. As a matter of fact, most of your Bibles have many of the words in verse 12 in italics, and that is because those words aren't in the Greek text. There are only about three of those words that are actually in the text, and so they are trying to figure out what Paul is saying here. Now I think the NASB probably has it pretty close. I think Paul is saying, "I want you to be like me." Paul is modeling what it means to be grace-filled.

One of the things we need in our churches are people who are grace-filled people. All this grace talk is really abstract, and it's hard sometimes for people to understand: what does that even mean? What does that look like lived out? Going back to this concept of "daddy" and God as a grace-filled God, one of the things those people who didn't experience grace from an earthly daddy need is to experience it in the community of the body.

It does remind me why, as a parent, I need to be a parent of grace. When I look back one day on my parenting, if I made an error, I want my error to be on the grace side. I don't want it to be on the Law side. I want my kids to understand grace. But if you didn't get that growing up, it needs to happen here.

So Paul says, "Be like me." He is modeling grace for them. But he also says, "...just as I became as you are." I think it might be better translated "as you *were*." I think Paul is saying that when he was with them, he entered into their lives. He extended grace to them. He became as they were, in order to lead them to a relationship of faith in Christ.

You see, grace allows us the freedom to do that. Grace allows us the freedom to enter into other people's worlds and lead them into a life of faith in Christ. The Law separates; the Law draws lines. The legalist divides us into camps, and it's *us* and *them*. That was exactly the situation in the first century. The Pharisees had divided up the people between those who were righteous and those who were not. The line was drawn and they could have no contact with those sinful people on the other side of the line. But when Jesus (who kept the Law perfectly) entered the scene, He walked across the lines and made contact with people in order to introduce them into a relationship with Himself.

Grace gives us the freedom to do that. The Law divides and puts us into camps. So Paul says, "When I was with you..." That's what he did—he extended grace. He says, "You have done me no wrong, but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me."

Apparently Paul had some disease that may have disfigured him. He seems to imply that they could have loathed him and rejected him; but instead, they loved him. It is because Paul

extended grace to them that Paul got grace in return. Grace does tend to beget grace. And he said, “You loved me and you treated me so wonderfully.”

Verse 16: “Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth?” Something has changed. Legalism turns us into people who are rigid, people who are unteachable, people who don’t want to hear the truth. Legalism becomes defensive and critical, and Paul senses these people aren’t treating them now like they did.

Verse 17: “They eagerly seek you [*the legalists*], not commendably, but they wish to shut you out [*throw you in prison—we saw that term last week*] in order that you may seek them.” That’s a very interesting statement. The legalist doesn’t cause you to focus your attention on Christ. The legalist causes you to focus your attention on the rule maker. Legalists throw you in jail in the bondage of legalism, and then you have to look to them as to whether or not you’re measuring up—whether or not you’re getting your checks. The legalists move your attention from Christ to them. They are in control; they’re the rule makers.

Verses 18 and 19: “But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, not only when I am present with you. My children, with whom I am again in labor [*that’s the word used to describe a mother in labor with a child*] until Christ is formed in you—but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”

Paul says his motive is not to get their attention on him, but rather, he says, “I’m laboring like a mother with child in order to get your attention on Christ—that Christ be formed in you, that you become like Him, that His life flows out of you.” He says, “I’d love to come to you and I’d love my tone to be different, but it can’t be right now because you people confuse me.” Paul is perplexed. It’s like having a rebellious teenager in your home. You’d like for the tone to be different, but it is hard to change it when they just keep rebelling.

Obviously there’s much more that Paul wants to say, but let me close by asking you a question. Are you a *son* or a *slave*? Paul says under the Old Covenant it was hard to tell who was who. But once Christ has come, it shouldn’t be hard to tell at all now. The difference is dramatic. One is in bondage under the Law. The other has the very life of Christ and is an adopted son of God, heir to the inheritance. The difference is radical, and it should be very evident.

So if you are a son, are you living like a son? What would you point to in your life as evidence that you are living out this grace-based relationship and no longer are a slave to the Law? If we could go back this last week and play back everything that has come out of your mouth, would it reflect grace? If we could go back and play back all of your thoughts in terms of how you judged and evaluated your fellow believers, would it reflect grace? If we could go back to everything you did this past week, every meeting you went to, every way you served, every act of kindness, everything you did—would it be the outflow of a relationship with Christ? Or would it be to just keep up with the checklist of things you need to do in order to be a good Christian before God?

If we are sons and not slaves, the difference grace makes ought to be radical and dramatic. Are you a son or a slave?